Coursing Currere: Tracing it forward

Jenna Abney

Mercer University

While the history of special education and the history of people with disabilities are extremely different, you cannot have special education without people with disabilities. Since special education was not formally introduced until the eighteenth century, it is necessary to first introduce the history of the treatment of students with disabilities which will eventually bring us to the introduction of special education. For as far back as written records go there have been people with disabilities, but how they have been treated in society has greatly varied. People with disabilities throughout history have had an extreme uphill battle, and the battle began as far back as the Greek and Roman empires. Although it has only been within the last century that equality in education has, to some degree, been provided, for a long time many have been fighting the fight and have paved the way for the education we see today. The way a child is treated and educated paints a clear picture to not only the child’s value, but to the social progress of that time period as well.

In the Ancient era, both the Greeks and Romans thought of themselves as superior human races. Anyone who deviated from their ethnicity, or who had physical or mental disabilities was marked as inferior. Realism was actively practiced during this time, focusing on what was real rather than what could or might be. The term idiot, used for those with disabilities, comes directly from the Greek language and is an opposite term for the word citizen (Winzer, 1998a). Anyone who was deemed of lesser intelligence, including those with intellectual disabilities was labeled as such. Infanticide was therefore common practice in history since no one wanted to raise a “substandard” child or be identified as a family with a “substandard” child (Teklemariam, 2010). It is well recorded that in Sparta, all children were considered to be owned by the state and those who were born with defects were to be disposed. People with disabilities had little to no value during this time and similar to slaves, had no civil status. (Gaw, 1907)

The Greek historian, Herodotus (484-425 BC) provides us with the first written record of a disability in his writings of a deaf-mute prince, son of King Croesus. Although it is recorded that the King used all his power to do what he could, his son never spoke a word. (Laes, 2011; Winzer, 1998b). Around the same time, it was also documented that Hippocrates (460-377) began the treatment of a range of exceptional conditions. Hippocrates treatment of people with disabling conditions is one of the first noted evidence of support for people with disabilities. He viewed those with any type of sensory deficits as missing intellectual capacity. Around the same time, Aristotle, who added to Hippocrates’ philosophy, portrayed those with disabilities as less than human and “unteachable” (Winzer, 1998a). In *Politics*, Aristotle’s derogatory view of exceptional persons is recognized when he writes“let there be a law that no deformed child shall live.” Later Hippocrates challenges this thought when he asks the question, “Which children should be raised?” (Winzer, 1998b).

It was not until 34 BC that we see the first chronicled history of a person with a disability receiving some type of education. The young grandson of Julius Caesar’s beloved sister was born mute *(natura mutus).* Therefore, even though he was of significant family, he would not have received an education had Messala Corvinus not been persuaded to teach him the art of painting. Through this first recorded history of “special” instruction, Quintus Pedius was able to later make a good career from his trained art (Laes, 2011). His success led the way for students of today, but the road to education for all has been a long and bumpy journey.

Later in the fourth century during the onset of Christianity, attitudes began to change in several ways for people with disabilities. No longer was infanticide practiced or considered law. At this time, the care of the less fortunate became the responsibility of the church and the first hospice care for the blind was documented (Nordstom, 1986; Winzer, 1998b). So many children up to this time were not only denied an education, but proper care as well. It took a monastery of monks to provide some semblance of care for people with disabilities, as few to this point saw any value in their worth. How can a child with a disability show his/her worth if the one thing that can change them is denied? Education was critical to any success, and this didn’t arrive for more than a century and a half later.

During the year of 533, a new code was established by the Roman emperor Justinian to determine, label and identify persons with disabilities in great detail. These new classification laws provided strict rules and regulations for people with disabilities which either denied or allowed (rarely) rights to those with disabilities. These laws were later merged with Germanic laws and prevailed throughout most European countries until the mid-eighteenth century (Winzer, 1998b).

As the Roman Empire collapsed, monasticism grew. With this growth, cloistering (or seclusion) of people developed as well (Winzer, 1998b). Asylums for special groups slowly began to spread mostly out of humanitarian concerns and pity, and this did little more than seclude people from the public. This segregation brought more care and protection for people with disabilities, but did little for rights or education. Christianity brought many changes, but it appears much of what was presented as equality was simply words not acted upon. According to Winzer, (1998b) as Christianity “preached the spiritual equality of all and diligently promised the kingdom of heaven to the meek in spirit, the hierarchy marked for heavenly attainment systematically omitted certain groups.”

The church was completely in power during the middle ages. Leaders in the church repeatedly excluded people with varying disabilities. Very few people were educated with most people unable to read and write (Gutek, 2011). Only the wealthy and those who had roles or future roles in the church were educated. Thomas Aquinas was of great influence on education during this time period and he followed the principles of Aristotle who believed in the natural order and a hierarchical society (Gutek, 2011). This belief directly impacted the care and education of those with disabilities because those with disabilities were considered to be on the bottom rung of humans, right next to animals. Human intellect was thought to be directly linked to the soul and provided a clear separation of those with disabilities who were thought to lack a soul (Winzer, 1998b).

Through this exclusive doctrine both in spirituality and living during the Middle Ages, people with disabilities became the center of many jokes and comical stories. Exploitation and ridicule during this time was common practice, and the mutterings and speech of the mentally retarded were often considered to be conversations with the devil (Winzer, 1998b). Writers throughout medieval times gradually began to use people with disabilities as the fool or “jester” character within a story. Unfortunately, these beliefs did not change with the transition from the middle ages into the reformation.

The rise of the reformation brought an educational and spiritual push for the common man, but the rights of the disabled were greatly excluded from this collective surge. Few people were literate at the turn of the 16th century. In England the numbers were as low at 10% for males and 2% for females (Gutek, 2011), and education for the masses grew to be a priority for all. This push for education though, did not include those with disabilities. Both the mentally ill and the mentally retarded began to fall under the threats of the witch hunters. The major leaders of the reformation further debilitated any support for people with disabilities. John Calvin preached that people with mental retardation were controlled by Satan, and Martin Luther even went further in his demoralization of this population. Luther not only believed that people with intellectual disabilities had Satan living inside, but he also once suggested that a child with a mental disability be taken to the river and drowned (Winzer, 1998b). This belief that those with mental disabilities were possessed drastically shattered any progress that the Christian church might have made and brought humans right back to the rule of the Spartans.

While the reformation was occurring in multiple countries throughout Europe, the Renaissance period was just beginning in other countries. The Renaissance had a much stronger humanistic approach than the reformation and encompassed a greater compassion for the study of the human body. With these studies came more sophisticated medical practices and inventions (e.g. common use of spectacles) that directly impacted the disabled (Winzer, 1998b). The study of teaching the deaf began to increase during this time and by the start of the Age of Reason, the first recorded book of special education was written. *How the Alphabet Came to be Used in a Sign Language* was penned in 1620 by Juan Pablo Bonet and provided additional insight into the education of students with hearing deficit (Padden, 2003).

During the time of the Renaissance, one man stepped forward and had the courage to recognize the need for education of young handicapped boys. A strong prevalence of deafness was recorded in the ruling families of Spain, and this manifestation, had a direct impact on the influence of special education. During the year 1578 in Spain, it is recorded that the Benedictine monk, Pedro Ponce de Leon, opened the first school for young boys with hearing deficits (Winzer, 1998a). His records report that many of the young boys not only learned to write, but to speak as well. The education of the deaf and blind began to grow significantly during this time period and many other schools followed suite, but this education was almost solely devoted to the wealthy (Winzer, 1998b).

With the approach of the French Enlightenment period, a change in the philosophical attitude to education began which significantly impacted people with disabilities. Empiricism was growing and for the first time ever, special education actually became an accepted branch of education (Winzer, 19998b). Rousseau‘s belief in human goodness is critical in the changing of previously archaic practices of the disabled (Gutek, 2011). The first truly humanistic approach to education of those who were not only deaf but also poor was Charles Michel Abbe de l’Epee (Nordstrom, 1986). In 1760 in Paris, France, The National Institute for Deaf-Mutes opened its doors and de l’Epee paved the way for all people with disabilities. Not long after this time in 1784, Valentin Hauy was so impressed by the education of the deaf that he opened his doors to the first school for the blind (Nordstrom, 1986). During this same time period, a rapid growth of schools for disabled (hearing and vision) began to open and conflicts of special education instructional methods began to emerge across various schools and countries. While de l’Epee taught only a manual language, the German instructor Samuel Heinicke made his method of teaching oral language to the deaf quite popular (Nordstrom, 1986). The Enlightenment brought not only the pursuit of instruction of those with disabilities, but also the inquisition into varying educational approaches to special education. This time period was crucial to the advancement of those with disabilities, and significant and rapid progress was clearly being made.

Across the ocean, American transcendentalism and educational reform was in fast pursuit of the Europeans where in 1817, the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb was founded by Lydia Huntley Sigourney in Hartford Connecticut (Winzer, 1998b). One of the key leaders in this educational change was Horace Mann whose common school movement drastically impacted special education within the U.S. He believed that education was the great economic equalizer among all peoples (Gutek, 2011). His educational philosophy was centered on socially integrative instruction. He was actively involved in the building and development of institutions for those with special needs. Since these schools began their start at the same time as the common school movement, they grew intricately together and were associated with many drastic changes (e.g. social, political, economic and religious) during nineteenth century America (Winzer, 1998b). Mann played a significant role in special education because of his philosophy and earnest drive for free public schooling for all which was supported by the local public taxpayers. The use of the term “all” later becomes an important word in the advancement of students with special needs especially those with intellectual disabilities.

Education for students with mental disabilities to this time was very limited and only the wealthy were allowed or provided any type of education, but with the push of great educational reformers like Horace Mann, Henry Barnard and Egerton Ryerson, a change in education was beginning (Winzer, 1998b). The medical model which focused greatly on the classification of disabilities became the foundation for the creation of many special needs schools. These schools were built around the specialized care and instruction for particular groups and were most often built outside of the city in a secluded location which was thought to promote health, but in the process did little more than seclude students (Winzer, 1998b).

The growth and expanse of specialized schools/institutions for the deaf and blind brought about the advancement of another specialty school. In 1848, for the first time ever came the advancement of those referred to as “idiots”. Samuel Howe, with important and critical support of Horace Mann, was granted financial backing to establish an experimental school for feebleminded youth. While the school located in a wing of the Perkins Institute ran for only three years, it identified and proved “that many idiots are capable of improvement in their bodily habits, in their mental capabilities, and even in their spiritual natures; and almost all can be made less burdensome to their friends and the community” (Howe, 1848, p. 67). Two years after Howe’s experimental school began the Massachusetts School for Idiotic and Feeble-Minded Children opened its doors and this began a large influx of specialized schools for the intellectually disabled across multiple states (Winzer, 1998b).

Education rapidly became specialized for all peoples including those of African descent and this segregation was maintained well into the middle of the 20th century. With this segregation, came a distinct view of separation of those not deemed “fit”. In 1883, the Eugenics movement began with *Essay in Eugenics* by Sir Francis Galton. This movement forced institutionalization as well as sterilization for all disabled. Unfortunately, this thought process continued to grow with the publication of such books as *The Kallikak Family* by Henry H. Goddard which suggested there was link to disabilities and immorality. Hitler later expanded such thoughts even further to the point of euthanasia (code named Aktion T-4) with the illumination of “life unworthy of life” (Disability History Timeline, 2002).

This time period was difficult for many, and yet, education for all was beginning to grow. This education differed greatly from school to school and varied quite drastically from one institution to the next. There were significant differences in theoretical approaches to education for these segregated groups of people. It was not until John Dewey (pragmatism) and Edward Thorndike (behaviorism) arrived that education began to make a critical adjustment. While Thorndike’s focus was on the drill, repetition and practice of the three R’s (reading, writing and arithematic), Dewey in contrast focused on developmentally appropriate approaches which were based in humanistic practices tied to educational psychology (Winzer, 1998b). Dewey’s principles and approaches quickly became woven and accepted in special education throughout the nation. While progressive education grew, advancement developed rapidly because of the pursuit of professional knowledge within the educational field.

Many changes during the forties led to educational reform. The return of disabled veterans provided awareness to the public that had long since been hidden in the segregated worlds of schooling. Education up to this time had been centered primarily upon the curriculum rather than the needs of the learner and a change in focus began to occur within the schools (Edgar, 2009). A more child-centered approach to education was noted and with this adjustment in concentration came many pursuits in educational alterations. One of the greatest modifications made to special education came directly from the integration and desegregation of schools. *Brown vs. the Board of Education* changed education completely throughout this country and not just for African Americans (Edgar, 2009). It gave life to the special education movement that was so desperate for all.

While the progress towards desegregation was made over 70 years ago in the U.S., it has been a long battle and struggle to shatter the extended and practiced teachings of specialized schools. The passage of Public Law 94-142 (Education of All Handicapped Children now called Individuals with Disabilities Act) in 1975 was critical in using progressivism to transform special education. No longer was special education considered a separate entity, rather, the individual was now supported by legislation and litigation to be educated as a part of the whole (Winzer, 1998b). As of 2007, 4% of the special education population is still instructed in special schools and 17% are instructed within special classes (Powell, 2009). While there are some benefits to separation, ultimately those who are segregated pay the price. The benefits of desegregation were and still are difficult for many to see since “our own lives influence the way we perceive things in the room” (Gaarder, 2007). Changes can only occur when we are able to see the problems through our own lenses. If these students are kept separated, it is difficult to see clearly the problems right in front of us.

Because special education is now firmly planted within the U. S., a plethora of new ideas and educational philosophies have arisen. As new ideas emerge, differences of opinions grow as to the “best” way to educate a child. Mainstreaming has become a controversial issue and at the turn of the century was being practiced with great inconsistencies across the states with differences as great as 90% mainstreaming in some states and as low as 27% in others (Winzer, 1998b). Has the answer been found? Of course not, and according to the long ago spoken words of Alexander Graham Bell, a great supporter of deaf education,

We are still engaged in discussing & rediscussing the questions that were discussed &

rediscussed by other teachers before we were born. The experience of the past indicates

that these discussion & controversies may continue…to the end of time *without*

*settlement* unless some new element can be introduced into the problem. (Bell, 1884,

quoted by R. Bruce, 1973, p 385)

As long as there are children to educate, we will continue to see changes occurring. It is critical though that we always search for the truth with open eyes and open hearts in the hopes that the connections and effective practices from past experiences and study will continue to grow. All students can learn, and it is up to teachers to determine the most effective means for such knowledge to be attained.

Resources

Bruce, R. 1973. *Alexander Graham Bell and the conquest of solitude.* Boston: Little Brown.

Edgar, A. H. (2009). *The history of curriculum in American schools.* Bloomington, IN:

AuthorHouse.

Gaarder, J. (2007). *Sophie’s world.* New York, NY: Farrar, Straus, & Giroux.

Gaw, A. (1906). The development of the legal satus of the deaf. *American Anals of the Deaf*

*and Dumb, 27,* 269-275, 401-423.

Gutek, G. L. (2011). *Historical and philosophical foundations of education: A biographical*

*introduction.* New York: Pearson.

Howe, S. G. (1848). *Report to the Legislature of Massachusetts upon idiocy.* Boston: Collidge

and Wiley. Retrieved from https://archive.org/details/66450930R.nlm.nih.gov

Laes, C (2011). Silent witnesses: Deaf-mutes in Graeco-Roman antiquity. *Classical World.*

*104*(4), 451-473.

Nordstom, B. H. (1986). *The history of the education of the blind and deaf.* Retrieved from

Eric. (ED309614)

Powell, J. J. W. (2009). To segregate or not to separate? Special Education expansion and

divergence in the United States and Germany. *Comparative Education Review, 53*(2),

pp. 161-187. Retrieved from

<http://www.academia.edu/573591/To_Segregate_or_to_Separate_Special_Education_Ex>

pansion\_and\_Divergence\_in\_the\_United\_States\_and\_Germany

Padden, C. A., & Gunsauls, D. C. (2003). How the alphabet came to be used in a sign language.

*Sign Language Studies, 4.1,* 10-33.

Rehabilitation Research & Training Center on Independent Living Management (2002).

Disability History Timeline. Retrieved from

http://isc.temple.edu/neighbor/ds/disabilityrightstimeline.htm

Teklemariam, A. A. (2010). Ethical issues in the Abyssinian customary practices and attitudes

towards person with mental or physical challenges. *Western Journal of Black Studies,*

*34.1*, 36-42.

Winzer, M. A. (1998a). A tale often told: The early progression of special education. *Remedial*

*and Special Education. 19*(4), 212-218.

Winzer,, , M. A. (1998b). *The history of special education: From isolation to integration.*

Washington, D. C.: Gaullaudet University Press.